

The People, the Masses, and the Mobilization of Power: The Paradox of Hannah Arendt's "Populism"*

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I

THIS paper is concerned with a puzzling feature of Arendt's thought, what might be called the paradox of her "populism." The paradox is that while she welcomed direct action by the people, she also feared and deplored almost all actual cases of grass-roots mobilization.

Much of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is devoted to analyzing the activities of totalitarian movements and racist or anti-Semitic mobs, and the book makes clear Arendt's distrust of almost all cases in which large numbers of people made their presence felt in politics. And yet Richard Bernstein is right to say that there is a case for calling her a "populist" (Bernstein, 1996: 61, 111, 126-33). "The People" was an honorific term in her vocabulary, and she often seems sympathetic to informal political action. But having seen the rise of Nazism and communism in Europe, she had good reason to know that informal and powerful mobilization is not necessarily to be welcomed.

Her own solution to the puzzle was to claim that most eruptions from the grassroots are not the work of the People at all, but of

*I am indebted to the British Academy for support in preparing this paper, and also to John Horton and April Carter for their helpful comments on an earlier version.

some other collectivity, such as the mob or the masses. If she still had faith in the People, this was because she sharply distinguished the cases when it really *was* the People taking action, from the more frequent occasions when it was not. In *Origins*, in *On Revolution*, and elsewhere, she distinguishes between the People and various other collectivities. Indeed she comes up with at least four different non-Peoples: the Mob, the Masses, and the Tribe in *Origins*, and the starving multitude in *On Revolution*. All of these are mobilized for action, all are powerful, but none is the People.¹

What is it that makes the difference? She herself does not use any such term as "non-People," and she does not give the reader a great deal of help in understanding what distinguishes the People from its imitators. So I would like to look first at her accounts of mobilization by others who are Not-the People, and try to work out what her criteria are for distinguishing the People from the rest. But I am also interested in finding out why she thought it important to make that fundamental distinction. After all, as she surveyed cases of political mobilization, genuine examples of action by the People seemed to her very rare, leading one to wonder why she wanted to hang on to the language of "the People" at all. Later I shall suggest a possible explanation, and argue that it should give us food for thought. The first task, though, is to attempt a brief sketch of the various *non-Peoples* that she identifies in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and elsewhere. A good deal of what she has to say sounds harsh to contemporary ears, sometimes outrageously so.

II

A large proportion of *Origins* is concerned with the power generated by individuals moving in concert, but most of the time it is not the *People* who are being mobilized. In fact the real People are hardly ever mentioned in the book, except as something with which a series of non-Peoples is contrasted.

The first to appear is the Mob, in the anti-Semitic riots that accompanied the Dreyfus affair in France. Arendt speaks of "the fundamental error of regarding the mob as identical with rather than as a caricature of the people" (1967: 107). They are, she says, easily confused because the People includes "all strata of society," while the Mob is recruited from all classes. She does not actually explain what the difference is, but she speaks of the Mob as the "residue" (107) or even the "refuse of all classes" (155), accumulated from those left behind after each of capitalism's economic cycles. These individuals have lost their place in the class structure. They are burning with resentment against ordered society, and easily mobilized for violence by demagogues. By contrast, (she claims) "the people in all great revolutions fight for true representation" (107). She also maintains that at the time of the Dreyfus affair, only those who stood with Clemenceau in support of Dreyfus were "the true people of France" (114). So it seems that the People are distinguished from the Mob on the one hand by their firm anchorage in the class structure, and on the other by their public-spirited action.

The Mob turns up again in the section on "Imperialism," in the shape of the "superfluous men," "spat out" by society (1967: 189), who found their way to South Africa in the rush for gold and diamonds in the late nineteenth century. They may sound like victims of fate, but Arendt claims that they had an alternative: they could have chosen to join "the workers' movements, in which" (she says) "the best of the superfluous men. . . established a kind of countersociety through which men could find their way back into a human world of fellowship and purpose" (189). This is not the only place where she claims that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the workers' movement was actually the authentic People, as distinct from non-Peoples such as the Mob (cf. 1958: 215-9). And there is a hint here that what makes the difference between belonging and not belonging to the People is whether or not one shares a human "world."

In her section on imperialism, Arendt is concerned with "superfluous men" who hadn't joined workers' movements but had instead become part of the imperialist mob. These were outside any "human world of fellowship and purpose" in a number of significant ways. Like the anti-Dreyfusard mob, they had no place in a structured society. They were also physically uprooted, freed from normal expectations and restraints. Arendt says that they had "escaped the reality of civilization" into a "phantom-like" existence where they had no sense of responsibility for their acts, particularly because in Africa they were preying on an utterly alien native population that had itself never been gathered into Peoples, only into tribes. She explicitly contrasts "Tribe" with "People," and explicitly links the difference to the "world." Genuine "Peoples," she claims, have worked on nature to create "a human world, a human reality" (1967: 192), and therefore have histories; whereas *prehistoric* tribes lived in and on nature, like animals, *without* building a human artifice and a "human reality."² She maintains that the Boers, demoralized by this example, had themselves turned into a tribe, "alienated from the pride which Western man felt in living in a world created and fabricated by himself" (194). Faced with African tribes, the Boers had also responded by developing a racist ideology, and this was eagerly adopted by the immigrant white mob. It legitimized their violence, and offered them a new bond of unity based on nothing but the color of their skin.

Arendt links these pathologies of overseas imperialism with what she calls "Continental Imperialism" in Eastern Europe, the Pan-German and Pan-Slav movements that also recruited mobs. She attributes what she calls "tribal nationalism" to these movements, contrasting their racism with the civilized nationalism of Western nation-states, notably France. The difference is that Western nationalism was the expression of a *people* in possession of an objective *world*. In a country like France, human achievements had been passed down through generations, uniting and defining the people. These ranged from the cultivated territory

and the cities to the polity and memories of ancestral deeds. *Tribal* nations, by contrast, did not share any solid human world of territory and institutions. Instead (according to their ideology), they shared German blood or the Russian soul. In other words, they shared internal, portable characteristics, not an external objective world.

From Arendt's point of view it was precisely this shifting worldlessness that made the mob available for mobilization by movements. For a movement (in her sense) was a new way of holding individuals together without gathering them round a stable world. Instead, they could be set in motion and held together by a racist ideology that proclaimed them superior by definition, and by joining in violent action to force another group into inferiority.

Arendt sometimes gives the impression that this kind of worldless mob is just a shapeless horde. However, her book is not primarily concerned with the short-term activities of racist mobs. She is interested above all in the formidable political phenomenon of totalitarian movements, and those, as she points out, were triumphs of organization. They involved large numbers of individuals acting together on a long-term basis, and they generated real power (1967: xviii, 387-8, 418). Nevertheless, this is in her view *not* the power of the People. Instead, we have here another kind of non-People: the Masses.

What is the difference between the Masses and the Mob in her theory? It seems to have a lot to do with the sheer scale of the crises that generated them. Where the Mob was a fringe phenomenon, the Masses included almost everybody in a society that had suffered catastrophic upheaval through war, revolution, economic collapse. The members of the Mob have lost their places in a world that is still standing; the Masses are left stranded by the collapse of the world itself. Arendt uses the image of a house divided into apartments. As long as the house stands, the inhabitants are related to one another and form a group simply by sharing the house. But if the structure collapses, they are left as

unrelated individuals. Similarly, if the structures that hold people together in society collapse, the inhabitants are turned into a mass of isolated individuals (Arendt, 1994: 357).

The section on the Masses in *Origins* refers to catastrophic experiences in Germany and Russia after the First World War. Arendt lays particular stress on the collapse of the class structure, which had been the one apparently solid feature of a society in which all stable institutions were being undermined by capitalism (1967: 314; cf. 1963: 162). Earlier we saw that a salient feature of the Mob was that its members were *déclassés*; now we find that loss of the entire familiar class structure left behind a Mass of bewildered individuals.

Arendt claims that totalitarian movements succeeded because they gave these lost individuals the "sense of having a place in the world" (1967: 324), and that they provided an *alternative* world based on fictions such as the Jewish conspiracy and the Aryan race. Totalitarian ideology provided a consistent explanation for the events that had set these individuals adrift (352). But Arendt stresses that the German masses found much more than a soothing doctrine in Nazism. More important, they found a *parallel world* in which they could live. The Nazis organized their movement as if their crazy doctrines were true; as if there really were a Jewish conspiracy, and as if Aryan blood really were different. The whole organization was based on fiction, but it nevertheless created "a kind of spurious stability" (356), a "fictitious world," one "fit to compete with the real one" (361-2).

Let me try now to sum up what it is that makes the difference between the People and non-Peoples in *Origins*.

Looking at the various contrasts we have encountered, two distinguishing features stand out. The difference between the People and their Others seems repeatedly to hinge on relation to the "world" and relation to "reality." Non-Peoples are in some sense "worldless," whereas the People share a human world. The People also have a common-sense grip on reality, whereas non-Peoples

inhabit a twilight zone of unreality, a "phantom-like" existence, "fiction."

These contrasts are suggestive and resonant, but neither is entirely clear. In *Origins*, Arendt draws on the distinction between the natural "earth" and the human-built "world" that she later set out in *The Human Condition*, but applies it in ways that are sometimes opaque. We saw, for example, that she attributes "worldlessness" both to the Masses who joined the Nazi party and to the indigenous Tribes that imperialists encountered in Africa. But both world and worldlessness seem to mean different things in the two cases, referring to the class system in one case and to deliberate shaping of the natural environment on the other. Although African tribesmen might lack a world in the sense of a humanized landscape, they were not socially uprooted—not, at any rate, until conquering imperialists uprooted them. Conversely, the German masses who voted for Hitler may have lost their social structure, but they still inhabited a human artifice that was relatively intact. So worldliness and worldlessness seem to have a range of meanings, and it is not clear why particular aspects should have political relevance at particular times and in particular places.

There are further puzzles concerning the association of worldliness with access to *reality*. This is a recurrent theme in *Origins*. Remember that the "superfluous men" who joined the South African gold rush had (in Arendt's words) "escaped the reality of civilization" as they confronted African tribes who had never constructed "a human reality." Similarly, when the masses lose their stable socioeconomic world, they also lose their common-sense grip on reality. It seems as if non-Peoples are in some sense cursed with exclusion from reality, whereas the true People in possession of a stable world are epistemically privileged: they have access to reality through their common sense, which comes from seeing their common world from different angles. There is an authentically populist ring to the notion that it is the People, rather than the Philosopher, who can escape from the cave of illusion into the

sunshine of reality. But large philosophical questions seem to be begged in these various references to "reality," and Arendt does not give us much help in understanding precisely what she means.

We may feel that at least we know where we are with her account of the "fictitious world" of the totalitarian movement, since the term "fictitious" apparently refers to systematic lying about matters of fact. But this is less transparent than it may seem. The "fictitious world" of Nazism was sustained by lies and based on the fantasies of racist ideology, but Nazi organization was not a fiction: think of the Nuremburg rallies and the massively visible presence of organization. Arendt herself says that totalitarianism in power establishes "the fictitious world of the movement as a tangible working reality of everyday life." Furthermore, she seems to be prepared to admit that this "fictitious world" of the totalitarian movement had the potential to become a real world. She says that Nazism might have settled down into "a new way of life" that could eventually "take its place among the widely differing and profoundly contrasting ways of life of the nations of the earth" (1967: 391). Presumably it would still have been organized around an irrational ideology, but it could have established a genuine world with "lasting institutions," no doubt including a caste system with taboos against intermarriage. It didn't do so, because totalitarian movements are dedicated to permanent revolution. The masses are held in what Arendt calls "the iron band of terror" (1967: 466) and cannot become a plural people gathered around a shared world. But it seems to be the momentum of totalitarianism rather than the fictions of ideology that stand in the way of establishing a "real" human world and a real People.

It is hard to say that we emerge from the book with clear criteria for distinguishing the People from their many imitators. Furthermore, in *Origins* the genuine People are conspicuous by their absence. Why is it, then, that Arendt hangs on to the notion so doggedly? Why does she not react to her traumatic experi-

ences of mass mobilization as others did, by condemning populism outright?

There may be biographical answers to this question. But leaving aside any personal motivations she may have had, I want to suggest that Arendt had two connected reasons for retaining her idiosyncratically populist notion of the People. First, the notion represented for her a distinctive and attractive political ideal, intimated in *Origins* though not yet clearly formulated in that book. Second, the term pointed to a political *phenomenon* that was all the more precious for being rare. Both of these points will perhaps become clearer if we look at the treatment of People and non-People in *On Revolution*.

III

On Revolution is organized round a contrast between the two great eighteenth-century revolutions. The American Revolution succeeded in establishing a republic and a constitution that are still going strong after 200 years. The French Revolution failed to establish a republic, and rapidly became derailed into the Terror. Arendt's reflections on the contrast are complex, but in her analysis the People have a good deal to do with the difference in outcome. In bald summary, the American Revolution was carried out by a mobilized People who shared a world, whereas the French Revolution was driven off course by a mobilized non-People, the starving poor.

It is clearer in *On Revolution* than in *Origins* what it means for a People to share a world because Arendt can point to political institutions round which the (free, white, male) Americans gathered and in defense of which the People could take action. Even before the Revolution, while they were still British subjects, the Americans had been "organized in self-governing bodies" (1963: 164). And since they were already accustomed to moving freely within that shared political world, it was easier for them to join

together to build the new federated world of the republic, while at the same time remaining plural and having scope for debates between different opinions (143-5). The outcome was a constitution that was, in Arendt's words, "a tangible worldly reality," an "objective thing" of exceptional durability (156).

In France, by contrast, there was no organized or constituted People. Once the monarchy was displaced, there was no shared political world already there (179). Early attempts to build one were derailed by the presence in the streets of a *non-People*—ironically known as *le peuple*—the starving Parisian multitude. Arendt says that the potential of the revolution, the incipient "uprising of the people for freedom," was overwhelmed by the eruption of "the multitude of the poor and the downtrodden," who emerged for the first time into the public realm (41).³ Despite its enormous pathos, this was politically disastrous. The project of building a free republic was displaced by futile attempts to cure poverty by political means, while the sheer urgency of starvation justified tyranny. But the experience also deformed the *concept* of "the people," because participants and observers mistook the multitude in the streets for the real People.

Why were they not the real People? Because although the poor were mobilized and united, they were united in the wrong way. Instead of being gathered round a shared world outside themselves, they were held together only by bodily necessity, by the identical pangs of hunger they suffered. Arendt describes them as "a multi-headed monster, a mass that moves as one body and acts as though possessed by one will" (1963: 89). Like the non-Peoples in *Origins*, they were powerful, but only for destruction, and quite unable to build "lasting institutions."

So Arendt offers us a stark contrast. On the one side, in America, stands an articulated People, mobilized from the grassroots for the sake of something objective and *outside* themselves. On the other side, in France, we have a non-People united only by things *inside* themselves, like the "tribal nationalist" mobs in *Origins*, with

nothing solid that could hold them together while allowing for separate perspectives.

So far, though, what she has to say about the People in *On Revolution* seems far from populist, for the People in possession of a world are an elite, raised above the preoccupation with bread that dooms *le peuple*. Arendt is uncompromisingly frank about this. She also points out that within the classical republican tradition, which had kept alive the memory of an alternative to monarchy, "people" always *had* meant a minority of the population (1963: 61).

Her understanding of "the People" is certainly in some ways socially conservative. But the other side of the book is a stress on the possibility of new beginnings, and people evidently do not have to belong to a privileged class to be capable of that. Human beings may or may not inherit political worlds, but they always have it in them to build new ones. America itself provides evidence for this going back to the Pilgrim fathers. Arendt points out that the first uprooted emigrants had established institutions and built a new world by the power of mutual promises (173-5), and she insists that this world-building capacity is always there—with the corollary that a genuine People is always potentially there. She sees signs of the same grassroots impulse to establish a new political world emerging in almost every subsequent revolution, in the "councils" that "sprang from the people as spontaneous organs of action and of order" (275; cf. 242, 247, 265). Although these efforts had failed, she seems to be saying that individuals set adrift by catastrophe and upheaval do not *have* to turn into a mob or a mass. Unlikely as it may be, they *can* build shared worldly institutions from the ground up—and if they do so, they will be a People and an elite at the same time (282).

I suggested earlier that *On Revolution* might help us to see why it made sense to Arendt to stick to her kind of populism, despite her suspicion of the mob, the masses, the barbarians and *le peuple*. So why did she cling to the notion of the collective People in action? I think we may be able to see two connected reasons. One

is conceptual: she had developed an understanding of "the People" that gave grounds for wanting such an entity to appear in politics. The other—and perhaps the more important—is phenomenological. She was convinced that such a People had on occasion made an appearance, and could do so again; that it was a political *phenomenon*, not just a political concept.

The phenomenological point is, I think, the more interesting, if also the more contentious, and I am going to spend most of the remainder of the paper considering it. But let us take a moment to look at the conceptual aspect—at what Arendt meant by "the people," and why action by a People of this kind might have a claim to legitimacy. In *On Revolution*, it seems that the American revolutionaries act as a People because, unlike *le peuple*, they are acting in and for a world of lasting institutions, part inherited, part established from the ground up by their own mutual promises. And a People linked by that sort of world has a claim to political respect, for three reasons.

In the first place, because the People are mobilized around a shared world, they can act as one while maintaining their plurality as distinct individuals. In contrast to Rousseau's "people," who are supposed to be united by an identical General Will *inside* them all, members of Arendt's People are held together by being gathered around the objective, federated, institutional world of the Republic (1963: 70-1). As she famously says in *The Human Condition*, "the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time" (1958: 52).

In *On Revolution* she contrasts the futile and destructive quest for unanimity in the French Revolution with the Founding Fathers' remarkably relaxed acceptance of debate between different opinions (1963: 88).

So the first reason why a worldly People may have a claim to political respect is that they are united *and* plural. Second, since their short-term private interests are diverse, they can be mobilized most successfully in favor of the interests they all share,

namely the long-term public interests of their shared world. Acting as a People lifts them out of preoccupation with private interests into care for the republic.

Third, since the plural People look at their common world from different angles, they have access to a variety of perspectives that enable them to see things in the round. Instead of being blinkered by ideology, they therefore have the potential to develop a politics of realism and common sense, as the Founding Fathers indeed did.

None of this implies that having the good fortune to share a republic must permanently raise those concerned to the heights of public-spiritedness and political realism. In *On Revolution* Arendt also deplored the degeneration of American politics into tradeoffs between private interests. But at the conceptual level, she offers an ideal of the People that is worth thinking about, if only because it contrasts with both of the most familiar conceptions. The People as she understands it is quite different from populist personifications of the People as a single being speaking with a single voice. But it avoids what tends to be seen as the only alternative: *antipopulist* dissolution of the people into an aggregate of individuals with no collective capacity at all (Riker, 1982).

Conceptually, this is interesting, if less clear than we might wish. We must remember, though, that Arendt's conceptual innovations are never intended just as moves in a theoretical game. They are meant to point to neglected *phenomena*—especially to those rare, memorable phenomena in which, she believed, human significance is to be found. And I suspect that the reason she hung on to the notion of the people was not simply that it represented an ideal of republican politics, but also because, in her view, it was a form of political mobilization that did occasionally occur. In other words, despite the overwhelming presence in her time of thoroughly undesirable forms of mobilization, she believed that on a few occasions—such as the American Revolution and the

failed Hungarian Revolution of 1956—it was possible to *see* the phenomenon of the People in action.

IV

Now, what are we to make of this? Shouldn't we put a collective People that occasionally manifests itself into the same category of phenomena as UFOs? Skepticism may seem the only appropriate response.

However, I want to suggest that despite our misgivings, and despite the undeniable obscurities of her thought, Arendt is on to something important. For one thing, it is clear that collective political entities *do* come and go, simply because they are the results of mobilization. It is a matter of common observation that individuals can combine to bring into existence a party or movement or organization that did not exist before, and that has new power to act. It is also a matter of observation that collective entities of this kind can crumble and fall apart again. We continually witness the phenomena of mobilization and demobilization.

References to "the people" within the discourse of democracy tend to give the impression that if it exists at all as a collective entity, it must exist everywhere and always. But we might be less skeptical about it if we thought of it as the kind of collectivity that exists occasionally and intermittently. And I think that when Arendt distinguishes between People and non-Peoples, she is not claiming that these are permanent entities with distinct memberships, but rather that they come into being when individuals are mobilized in different ways. From her point of view, the People are individuals mobilized in defense of a shared public world. Despite its rarity, this seems to her highly significant. Once in a while it may be powerful enough to generate the "lasting institutions" of a republic, legitimized by the memory and myth of the People in action. But even if it dissolves again without leaving that worldly legacy, it can still leave behind the

memory and myth that offer glimpses of republican freedom to inspire others into action.

This account seems to me to make sense of the conundrum I started with: how Arendt could be a "populist" while deploring most cases of what others might classify as popular mobilization. But I want to end by suggesting that it may also shed some light on an obscure and embarrassing aspect of contemporary democracy. For as democratic political theorists at the start of the twenty-first century, we do not seem to be able to do without the legitimizing idea of the People, but we do not know what to do with it.

Since the collapse of communism, it seems that the only remaining source of political legitimacy (for those of us who are not religious fundamentalists) is the consent of the people. Even the most unpopulist of democratic theorists cannot actually write it out of the script. Habermas (for instance) says that he does not reject what he calls "the intuition connected with the idea of popular sovereignty"—though he does his best to render it harmless by translating it into anonymous processes and procedures (Habermas, 1994: 10). Similar ambivalence can be found in other contemporary commentators, and it prompts further questions.⁴ If the collective People cannot exercise power, if they cannot take action on the public stage, how is it that legitimacy can be based on them? Why bother with Habermas's "intuition connected with the idea of popular sovereignty" if the notion of a sovereign People in action is really quite meaningless?

The answer may of course be that "the people" is just a necessary myth: this emperor has no clothes, but to keep the system functioning we must go on admiring his imaginary robes. But there is a less cynical way of looking at myths that sees them not as pure fictions but as transformed memories. And we may after all ask how was it that the notion of the collective People as a source of legitimacy ever entered the vocabulary of politics? There is certainly nothing self-evident about it. Historically we can trace the idea to certain strikingly powerful examples of polit-

ical mobilization, above all to the *populus Romanus*, who generated so much power and such lasting institutions as they gathered around their *res publica*, the public *something* that they shared. The memory and the myth of that collective action and collective power lasted much longer than the institutions themselves, and helped to inspire later cases of popular mobilization that in turn renewed the myth.

Within modern democracy, as Habermas and others point out, the myth has been usefully domesticated into a legitimation for complex processes and procedures. But I do not think it is a flight of fancy to say that we have witnessed the renewal of the myth in our own time, in events that Arendt did not live to see. Cases of what is sometimes called "People Power" have been quite numerous in the past couple of decades, but the most notable is surely the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980s. This was the most spectacular grassroots mobilization of our time, conjuring power out of nowhere, creating its own world of informal institutions, and shaking the existing political structure to its foundations. But the same could have been said of Nazism in the 1930s, and of many other examples of political mobilization. Why might Solidarity in particular count as a manifestation of the People?

If we were simply to draw on the multiple meanings of the word "people" in English, then we might argue that Solidarity counts three times over. Starting as a trade union, it was in the first place a movement of what used to be called "the common people" against the rich and powerful. Equally clearly, it was a movement of the national people of Poland against Soviet imperialism. And third, in view of its concern with democratic rights and the overwhelming support it attracted across Polish society, it evidently had a better claim than the official "People's Democracy" to be the democratic people as ultimate sovereign authority (Touraine et al., 1983: 2).

But do Arendt's distinctions between People and non-Peoples help us to analyze what was special about this movement? Note that action, however large-scale and spectacular, is not enough to

signal the presence of the People. It is only if we forget Arendt's experience of Nazism that we can see her as the patron saint of direct action, welcoming every eruption of the population into the streets. But if we look back to the characterization of action by the People that emerged from our examination of Arendt's books, we do find some interesting similarities. One of the striking features of Solidarity was what Arendt would have called its "worldly" character: its devotion to institution building from the ground up. Nothing could have been less like an amorphous, impulsive, violent mob or a helpless mass. To quote Alain Touraine and his associates, "Here was a popular movement which behaved like a legislative assembly infinitely anxious to respect legal procedures" (Touraine et al., 1983: 2; cf. 50). Furthermore, despite its trade union origins and economic grievances, the movement was overwhelmingly concerned with long-term public interests such as political freedom and national independence (Touraine et al., 1983: 4). Its formidable unity was unideological, allowing for intense internal debate at all levels. And the feature that was in some ways the most remarkable of all was a political sobriety worthy of Arendt's Founding Fathers: an exceptional degree of political realism and common sense, together with a remarkable capacity to exercise self-restraint and put shared long-term interests above private interests and short-term impulses.

Up to a point, Arendt's conception of the People united by and in defense of a shared institutional world built from the grassroots fits quite well. But only up to a point. One conspicuous feature of Solidarity as a movement of the People does not figure much in Arendt's analysis, and that is the national and religious dimension that was evidently crucial in the emergence of Solidarity as a collective actor (Bakuniak and Nowak, 1987), and in motivating that disciplined devotion to the public interest. As Solidarity leader Lech Walesa put it, "The interests of the Polish nation will always override our own particular interests" (Touraine et al., 1983: 45). When looking earlier at *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, we saw that

Arendt was at times willing to recognize the connection between nationhood and the People, at any rate in the case of France (cf. Canovan, 1999). But her emphasis was squarely on France as an inherited human artifice, rather than as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983).

As a practical test of Arendt's thinking about the People, therefore, the case of Solidarity is suggestive rather than conclusive. As a phenomenon, however, it was significant—and Arendtian—in yet another way. Arendt always insisted that the meaning of human activity, and especially politics, was to be found less in its humdrum regularities than in rare events. Occasional appearances by the People—memorably represented by Solidarity—fall into this category.⁵ The great days of any such mobilization are always limited. But Solidarity left behind the memory—which rapidly crystallized into a myth—of the People in action, of the moment when the public arena, which Claude Lefort calls an "empty place," *was* briefly occupied by a collective yet plural People.⁶

As Arendt's analyses of the Mob and the Masses forcefully remind us, most cases of large-scale mobilization are not like that. It is therefore not surprising that so much in modern democratic institutions and democratic theory is designed to guard *against* informal mobilization rather than to encourage it. But if democracy continues to draw legitimacy from the myth and possibility of the People in action, then it is a matter of some importance and delicacy to distinguish the few cases of mobilization that really do reinvigorate the republican tradition of the People from the many that do not. Whether or not we can go along with Arendt's judgments, her thinking may encourage us to pay more attention to the People as a phenomenon as well as a concept, and particularly to reflect on contemporary cases of popular mobilization.

Notes

¹Arendt does not herself capitalize "people," etc.; I use capitals in this paper for the sake of clarity.

²There are echoes of Locke, Hegel, and Marx in Arendt's claim that you have to work on nature and transform it to be fully human; you have to build a human artifice on a humanized territory to have access to reality and to be a *people*. There is in her view nothing genetic about this. Although you may have been *born* into a tribe, you can still be redeemed through "regular labor and urban life" (1967: 205). But she claims that in their pre-imperialist condition, African tribes were worldless and could not act politically as Peoples, though they could at times be gathered into a horde, as in Chaka's Zulu conquests (1967: 192). All of the various non-Peoples that appear in *Origins* are mobilized and powerful, but only for destruction. None of them shares a solid, lasting world, or has any prospect of creating one.

³For an alternative treatment with a markedly more sympathetic emphasis see Arendt (1958: 218-9), where she takes *le peuple*, represented by the *sans-culottes* in the French Revolution, to mean "the actual political body, distinguished as such from the population as well as from society."

⁴A more ingenious way of dealing with it is provided by Claude Lefort, who explicitly recognizes the problematic nature of the People. For him, the historic mistake that made totalitarianism possible was to suppose that democracy was analogous to monarchy: to suppose, in other words, that the People as a body could fill the political space left when the sacred body of the king was expelled. Instead, democracy is in his view a more subtle form of polity:

The legitimacy of power is based on the people; but the image of popular sovereignty is linked to the image of an empty place, impossible to occupy, such that those who exercise public authority can never claim to appropriate it. Democracy combines these two apparently contradictory principles: on the one hand, power emanates from the people; on the other, it is the power of nobody. Lefort (1986: 279).

⁵Cf. Goodwyn (1991: 117): "The point can never be overstressed: popular democratic politics is rare in history." Goodwyn is somewhat critical (403) of Arendt's account of the Hungarian uprising of 1956.

⁶Cf. the attempt by Bruce Ackerman (1991, 1998) to articulate what he sees as the unscripted role of the People within the constitutional development of the American republic. Like Arendt, Ackerman is responding to what he sees as neglected phenomena that are real and significant despite the problems of conceptualizing them. His practical

aim is to devise procedures that can accommodate the rare moments when the population is jolted out of its private preoccupations and mobilized behind a great constitutional reform: moments, as he puts it, when The People speak. Ackerman (1991: 6; 1998: 409).

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